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ABSTRACT

The visual art forms of the Northwest Coast Indian Tribes of Alaska (Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian) share common distinctive design elements (formline, ovoid, U-form, and curvilinear shapes) which are referred to as the "Northern Style." Designs represent events or characters taken from the oral tradition of song and legend. Characteristics of these elements are described and identified, and photographs of 19 art objects illustrating these elements are included in this collection of color plates. The art objects include a woven basket, carved and painted bentwood chests and boxes, carved bowls and spoons, woven and carved ceremonial hats, musical rattle, "Cooper" plate, shaman's charm, a free-standing sculpture, halibut hook, carved argillite tray, and silver bracelet. The reverse side of each color plate presents descriptive information about the object including (when available) measurements, artist, history, uses, Indian name, material, and construction processes. (NEC)

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Northwest Coast Indian Art

Alaska State Museum

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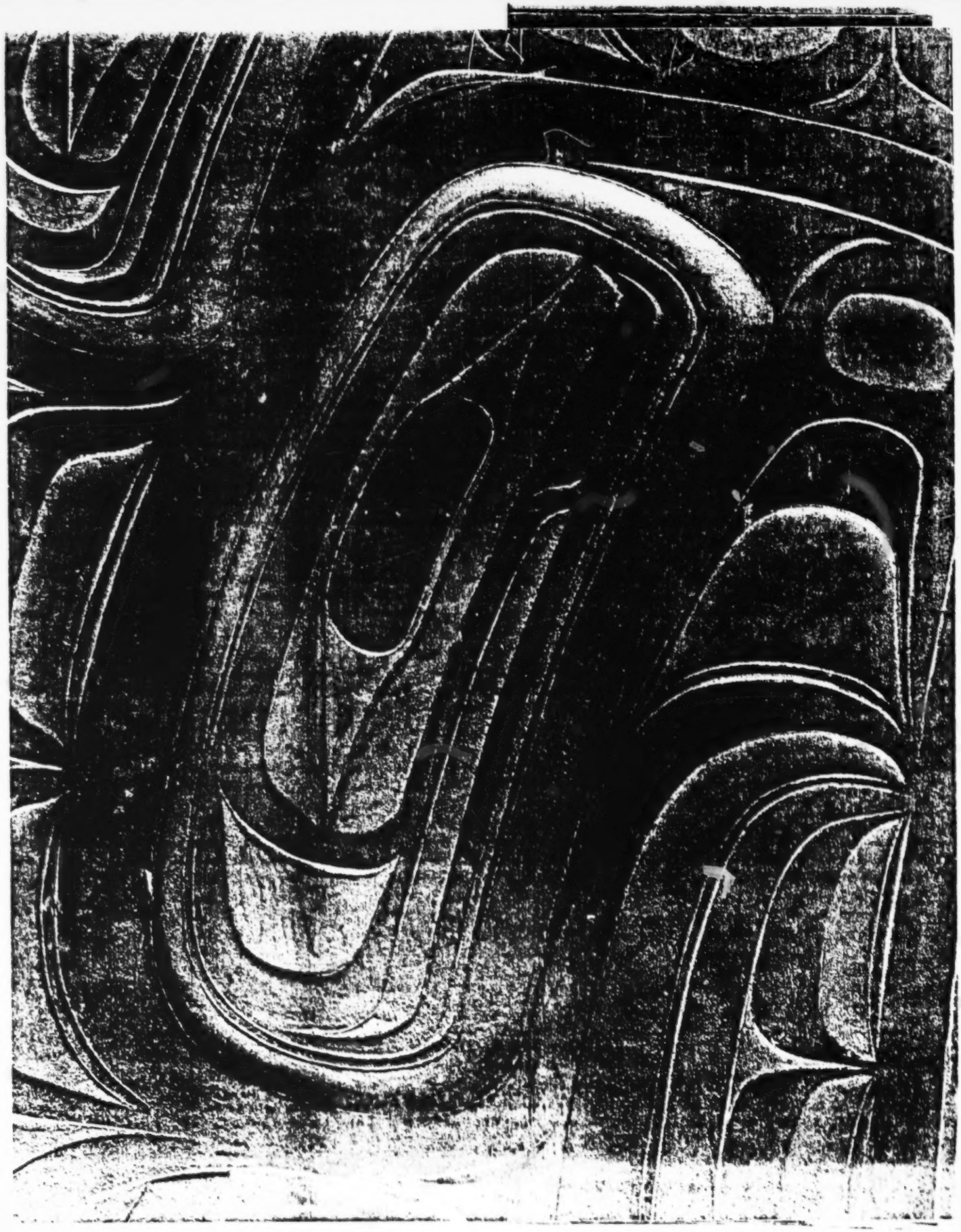

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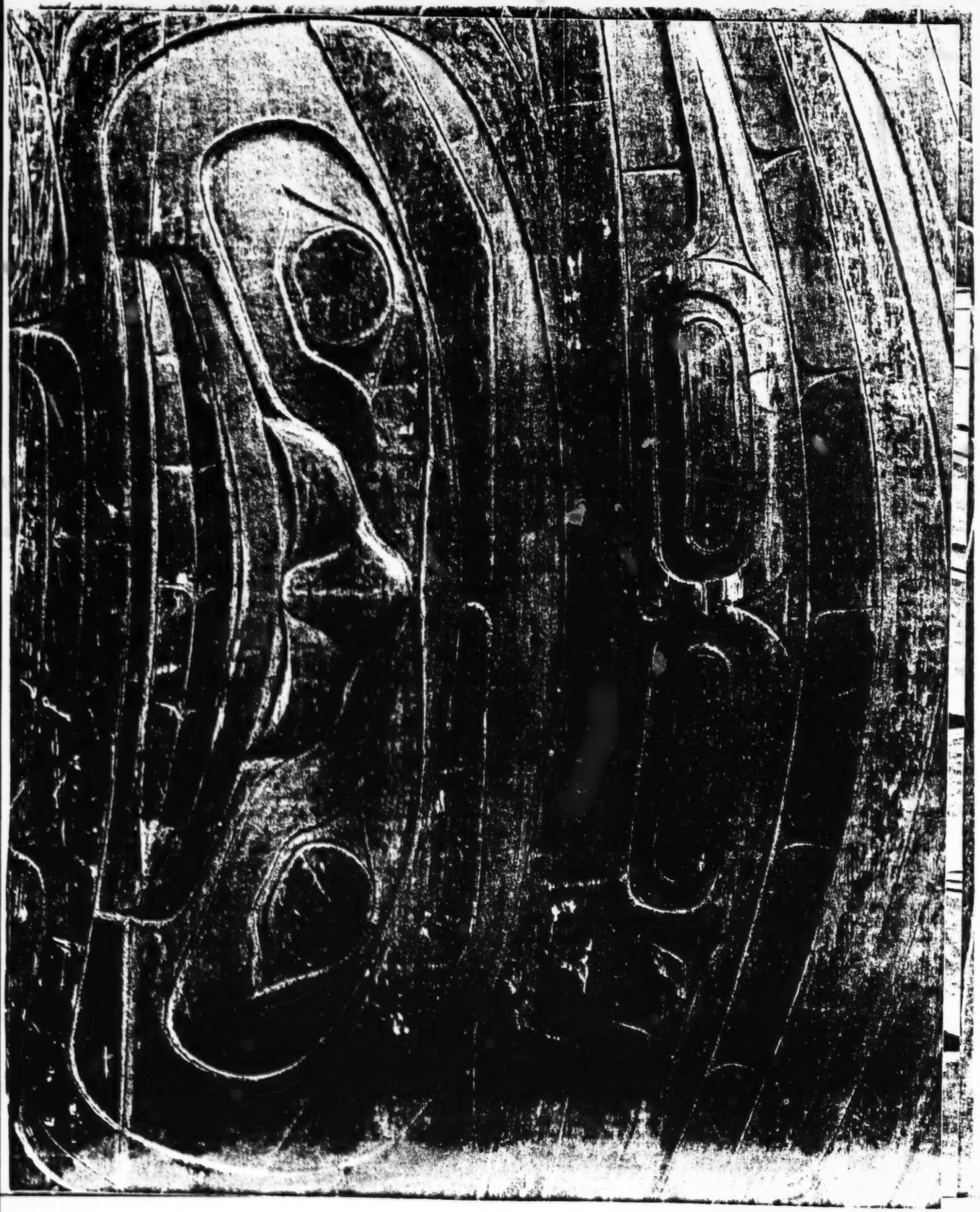

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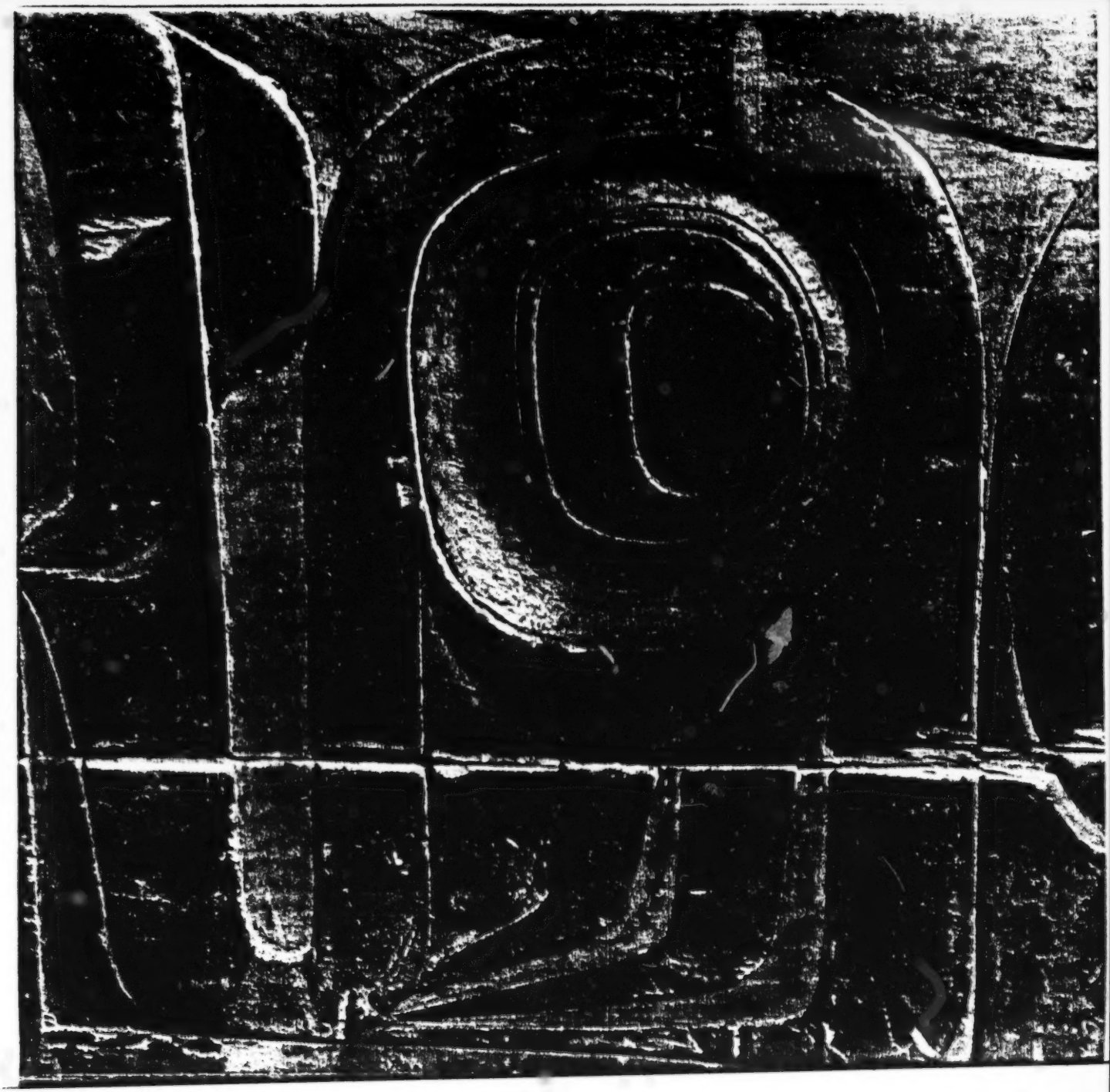

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Elizabeth Knecht, Graphic Design

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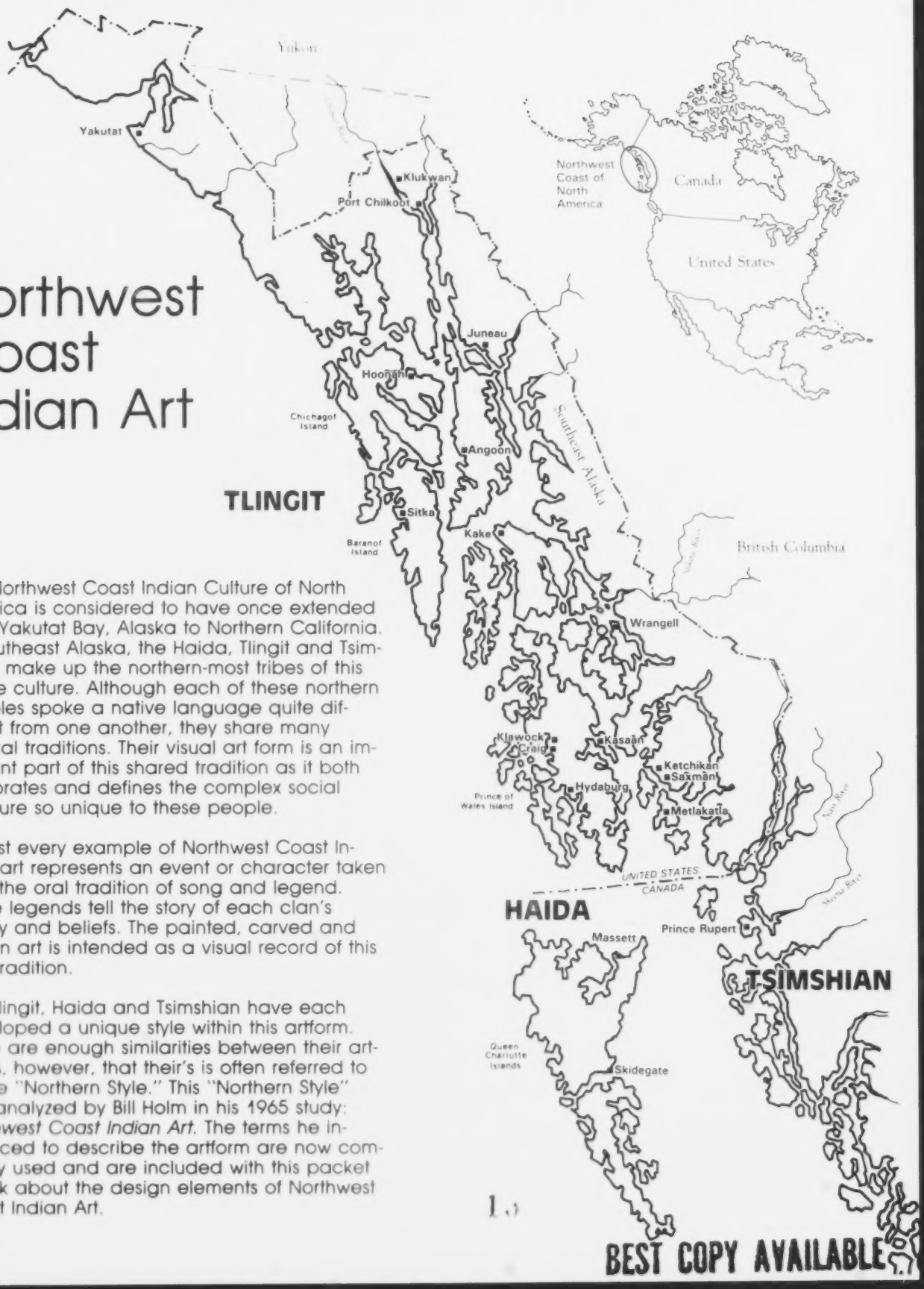
Northwest Coast Indian Art



The Northwest Coast Indian Culture of North America is considered to have once extended from Yakutat Bay, Alaska to Northern California. In Southeast Alaska, the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian make up the northern-most tribes of this native culture. Although each of these northern peoples spoke a native language quite different from one another, they share many cultural traditions. Their visual art form is an important part of this shared tradition as it both celebrates and defines the complex social structure so unique to these people.

Almost every example of Northwest Coast Indian art represents an event or character taken from the oral tradition of song and legend. These legends tell the story of each clan's history and beliefs. The painted, carved and woven art is intended as a visual record of this oral tradition.

The Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian have each developed a unique style within this artform. There are enough similarities between their artworks, however, that their's is often referred to as the "Northern Style." This "Northern Style" was analyzed by Bill Holm in his 1965 study: *Northwest Coast Indian Art.* The terms he introduced to describe the artform are now commonly used and are included with this packet to talk about the design elements of Northwest Coast Indian Art.

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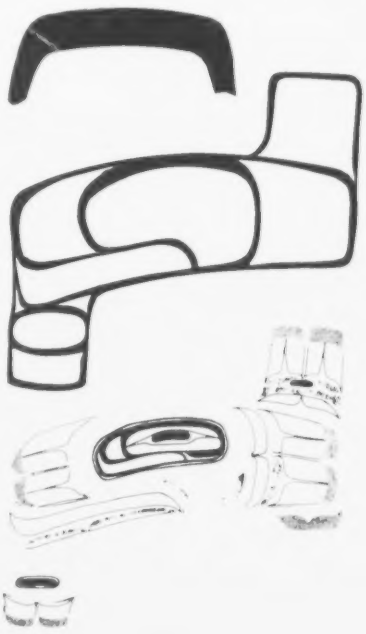
Northwest Coast Indian Art: Design

Many styles of Northwest Coast Indian Art can be found along the coast. In Alaska, the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian are each known for a particular style in their art. Certain elements or forms of design, however, are always included and can be found in each of these styles. By looking at these design elements you can identify what makes Northwest Coast Art so unique and different from other art forms.

The basic design elements of Northwest Coast Art include the **Formline**, the **Ovoid** shape, the **U** form and a quality of line and shape called **Curvilinear**.

• **Curvilinear** means curving line. This term describes the type of line and shape found in almost all examples of Northwest Coast Art. Each line and shape is drawn with a slight but consistent curve and the corners of shapes are neither round nor square but appear to be rounded squares or squared curves.



• The **Formline** is used to define and organize the entire visual image and is probably the most characteristic design element in this artform. Each shape is both formed and connected to the rest of the design by the formline.

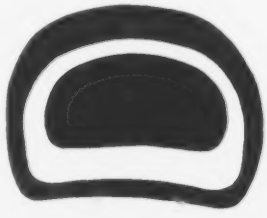
There are two types of formlines; the **Primary Formline** is usually painted black and is used to show the main forms of the subject in each design. These main forms usually include the outline shapes of the body, head, ears, arms and joints of the subject.

Primary formlines are all connected and tend to organize or unify the entire image. Besides connecting each section, primary lines help unify the image by appearing to flow together. This flowing appearance is due to the curvilinear quality of the formline and a slight tapering in the formline width. This tapering or narrowing of the formline occurs at the corners and joints where one line meets another.

The **Secondary Formline** is usually painted red and is used to show details of the primary formline design. These details often include hands, claws, feet, arms and facial features like the cheeks, mouth and tongue. Secondary formlines are usually enclosed and connected by a black, primary formline.

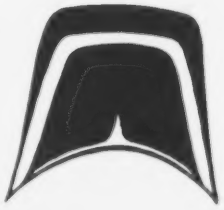
• The **Ovoids** and **U forms** are the basic design units. They are used by the artist like building blocks that can be combined and arranged to fit the composition.

The **Ovoid** form is sometimes described as a rounded rectangle, a flattened circle or as a bean shape, but "ovoid" has become the accepted term.



Although the ovoid form can be found in many different shapes and sizes there are always certain features included.

- Ovoids always curve up slightly on the top.
- The two sides also curve out, but the formline tapers and is usually narrower on the sides than along the top.
- The bottom of the ovoid is often flat or curved in slightly and the formline is always thinner along the bottom than along the top.
- Shorter ovoids sometimes curve out at the bottom. When this is the case the ovoid becomes rounder and sometimes forms a circle shape.



The U form, like the ovoid, is a design unit that can be used in various ways. U forms often represent certain parts of the figure like the ears, nose, beak, fins and feathers. They are also used as an abstract design element and often appear as space filler. U forms are usually connected to an ovoid form.

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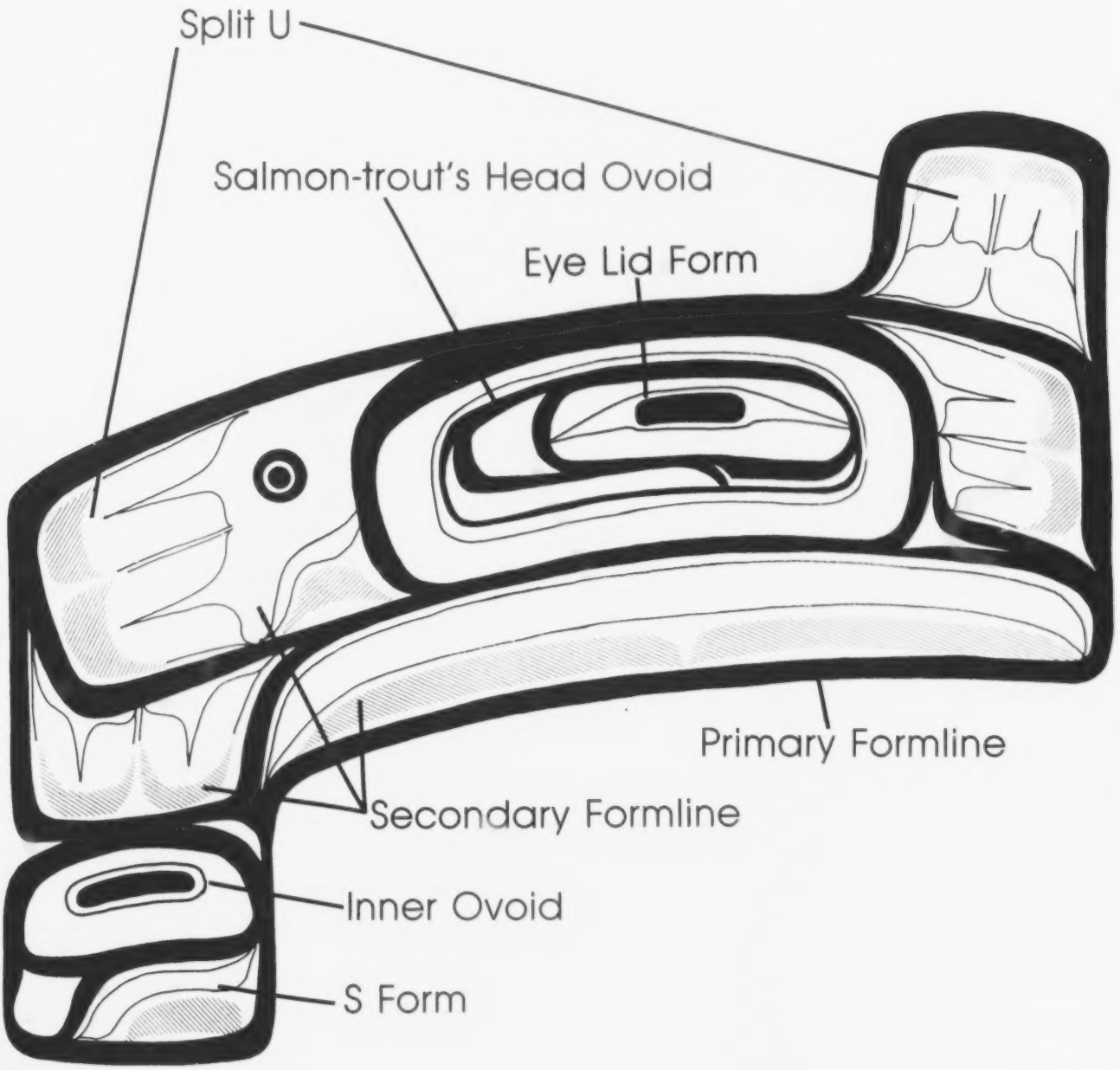
DESIGN ELEMENTS



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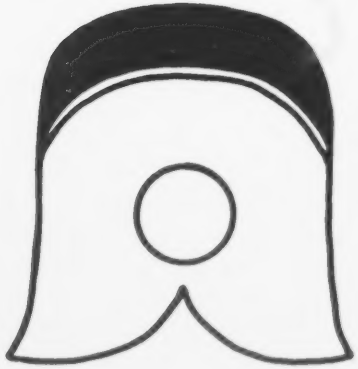
U FORMS



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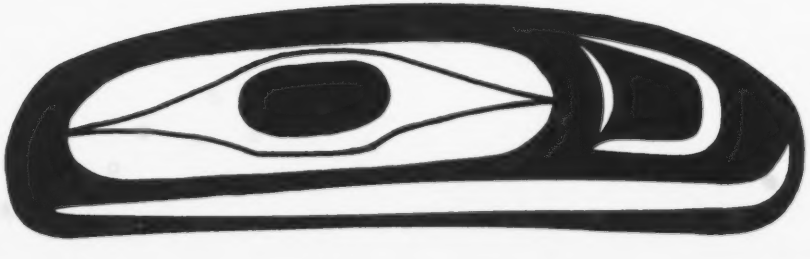
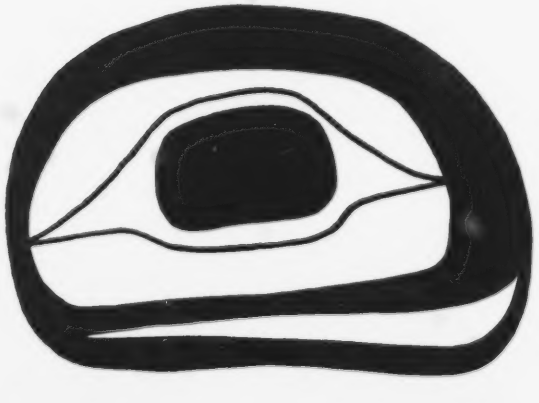
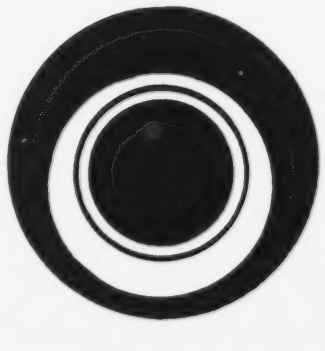
OVOIDS







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Spruce Root Berry Basket

Tlingit—Seigataana

II-B-1696

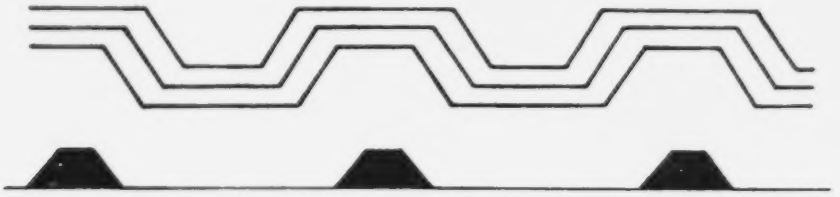
Roots from the Sitka Spruce tree were used to make this basket. The designs, or colored patterns, are woven onto the surface of the basket. Dyed grass and fine spruce root are used for the design pattern embroidery.

Each of these patterns has a name and is commonly used among Tlingit weavers.

The top and bottom border patterns are known as "X'óow kasayeiyí" which means blanket border-fancy picture. This is a recent design which probably comes from the Hudson Bay trade blankets.

The central band is a combination of two designs; "Butterfly" and "Half of a Salmonberry."

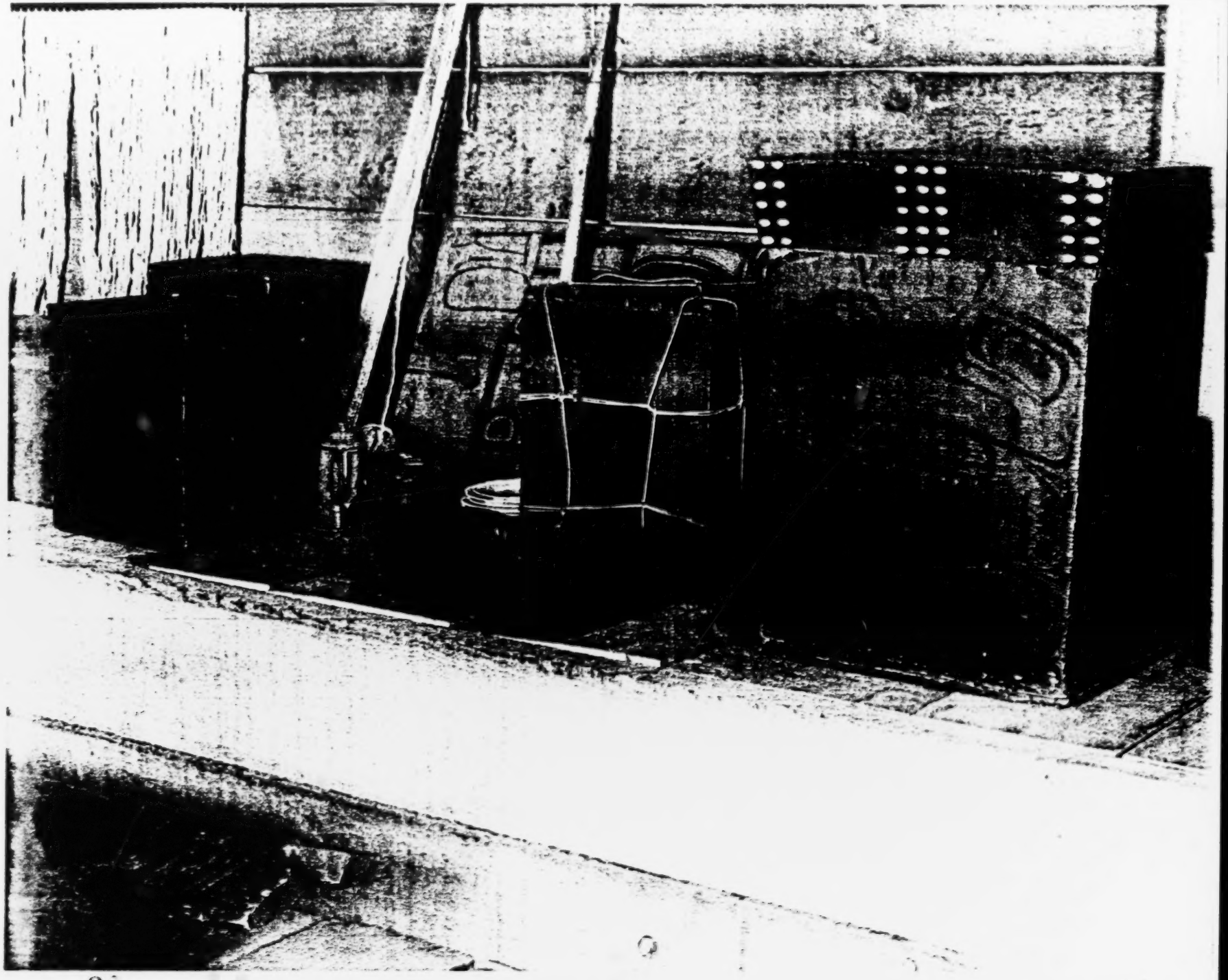
"Tleilú" means "Butterfly" and the design is meant to show either the jerky flight pattern of the butterfly or the outline of its outstretched wings.



"Aanax̲ Tléikw Shayakígi" means "Half of a Salmonberry." This is one of the most commonly used design patterns and is often used to complement designs like the "Butterfly." The colors used in this basket are listed below along with the Tlingit name and meaning:

Light Red–"Kwus Kus-su'ck-ho" (red like the sky at sunset)
Deep Red–"X̲'aan Kus-su'ck-ho" (fire-red)
Yellow–"Katl'áatl'" (like the yellow warbler)
Blue-Green–"X̲'éishx'w" (like the crested blue jay)
Green–"Kas'oon"
Orange–"Kashoox̲'" (like the breast of the robin)

Measurements:
Height–11"
Width–12½"



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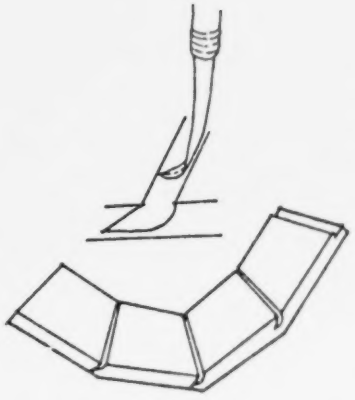
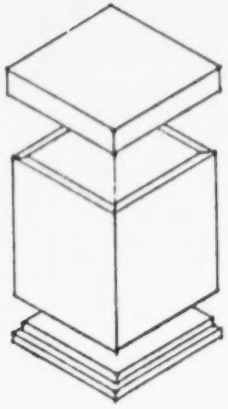




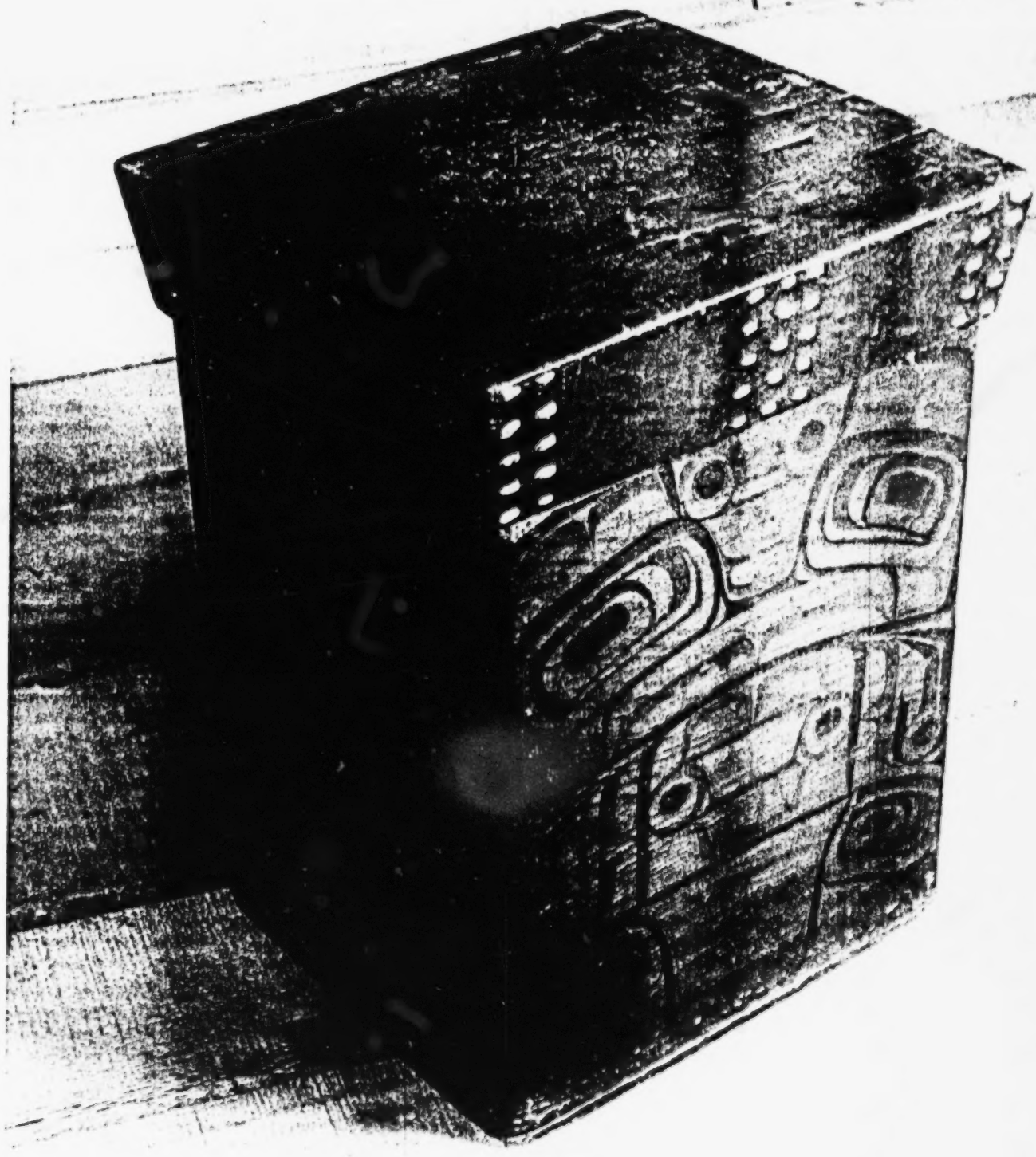
Bentwood Boxes

Tlingit—Laktix'; Haida—Tawt; Tsimshian—Unx or Xbiis

Bentwood boxes, bowls and chests are used to hold food and valuable possessions. The boxes intended for everyday use are left plain or simply painted with a red band at each corner. Those boxes or chests intended for the storage of valuables or to be used as food containers at a feast or potlatch are decorated with painted or carved designs. These designs, although similar, represent the clan crests and family history.

Bentwood boxes are made to be tightly sealed and most can hold water or oil. Bentwood boxes are commonly used as containers for cooking along the Northwest Coast. In order to cook food, hot stones are lifted from the fire with wooden tongs and placed with food in a water-filled box. As the rocks are continually changed for hot ones from the fire, the water is heated and the food is boiled or steamed.

These boxes are called bentwood because of the way in which they are made. All four sides are made from one flat piece of wood that has been notched and bent at intervals to form the corners of the box. This method leaves only one seam or joint that is lashed and pegged together so tightly that the box will hold water or oil without leaking. In order to bend the wood at each corner the Native craftsman cuts a "Kerf" or notch for each corner. The board is then steamed to make the wood fibers soft and flexible. Then each corner is bent to shape until dry. After drying, the steamed board will hold the shape of the box and can be fitted with a tightly sealed bottom and lid.



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Bentwood Storage Box

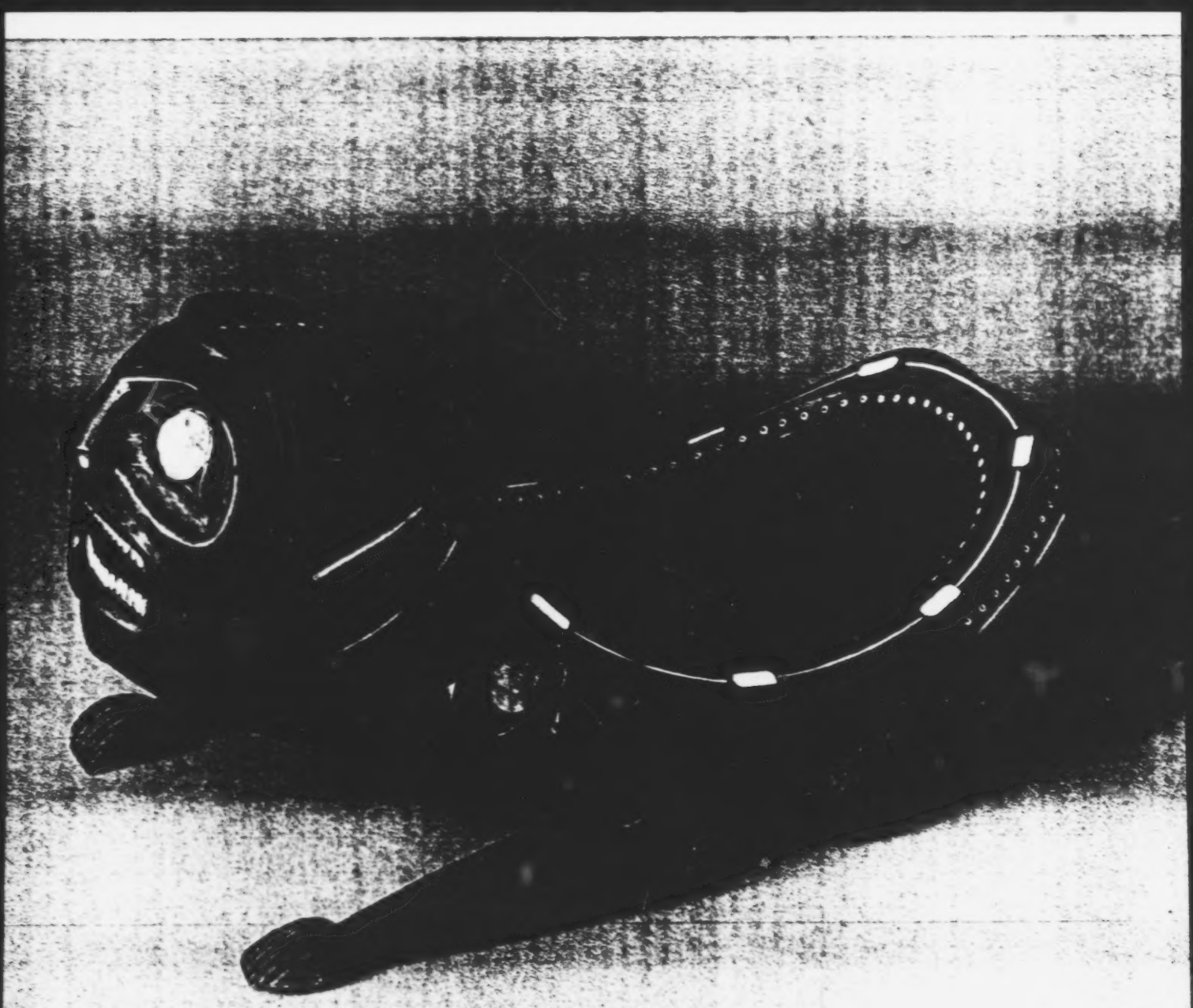
II-B-1223

Painted bentwood boxes like this were usually used for storage. Valued family possessions like dance masks, rattles, ceremonial clothing or Chilkat dancing blankets would be carefully stored in this type of box. The hollow lid was made to fit tightly and is inlaid with Opercula, the ivory-like foot of the Sea-snail shell often used as an inlay on boxes and bowls.

The painting, which represents the owner's clan crest, fits a design style that is typical for this type of box. The primary (Black) formline depicts a large head, central body, joints and feet. The secondary (Red) formlines show details of the mouth, cheeks, ears and body.

The opposite side of the box is also painted. The designs are very much alike on each side. The two narrower sides have a very simple ovid design painted in red.

Measurements:
Height–24¼"
Width–20¼ x 17¾"



Bent Box Available

Bentwood Chest

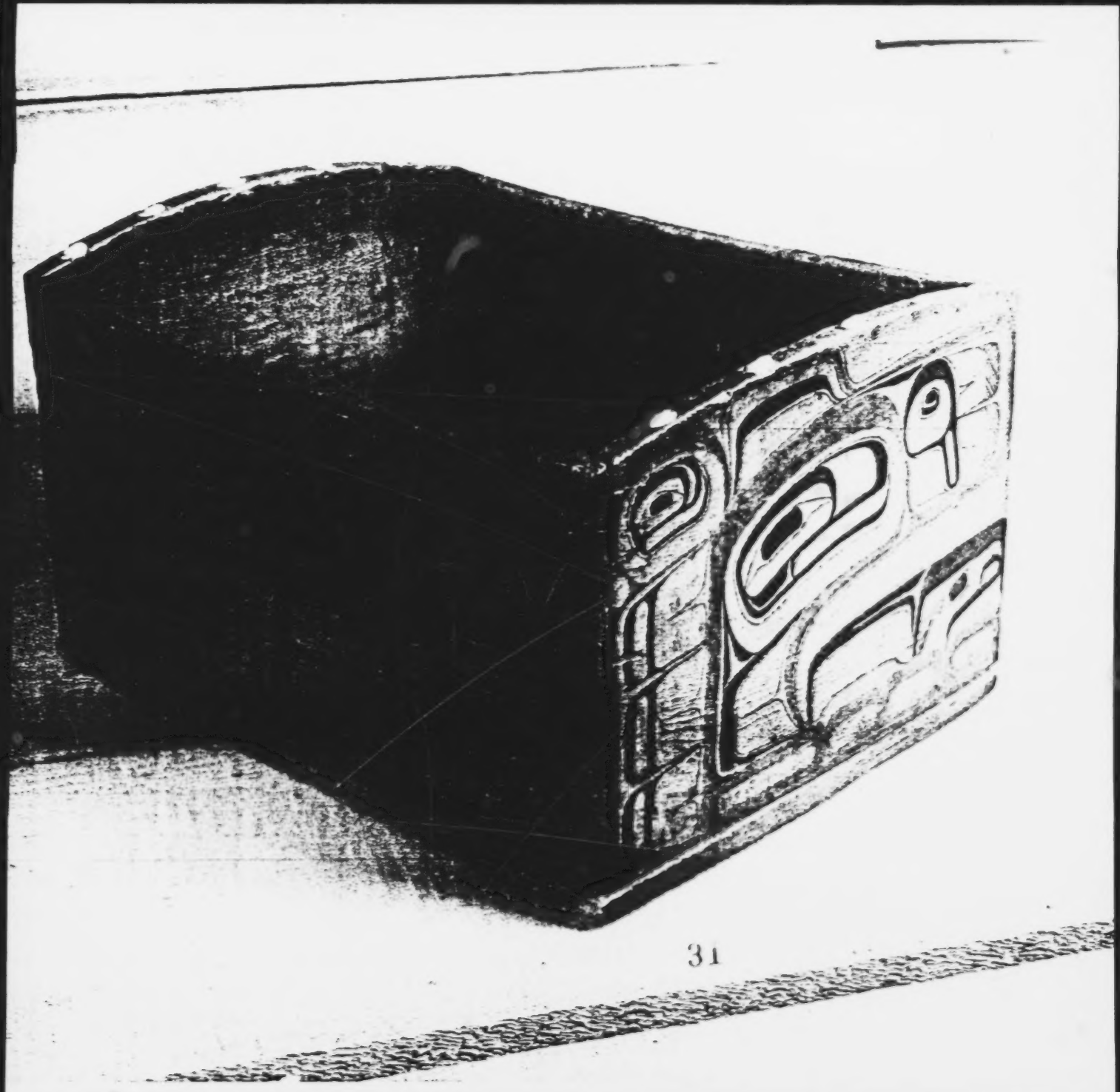
Tlingit—Kook, Haida—Kan, Tsimshian—Xbiis

II-B-1257

This large bentwood chest is another example of a bentwood intended for the storage of highly valued clan possessions. Unlike ordinary bentwood boxes which were often made and painted by clan craftsmen, chests were traditionally made by master artists and are considered the high art form of the bentwood box.

Chests are painted and carved to represent the clan heritage they were to contain and thereby became an important clan emblem in themselves. A chest like this would be displayed at important gatherings and could also be used as a burial box.

Measurements:
Length–33½"
Width–20½"
Height–21¼"



Bentwood Food Bowl

Tlingit—Daneit

II-B-1224

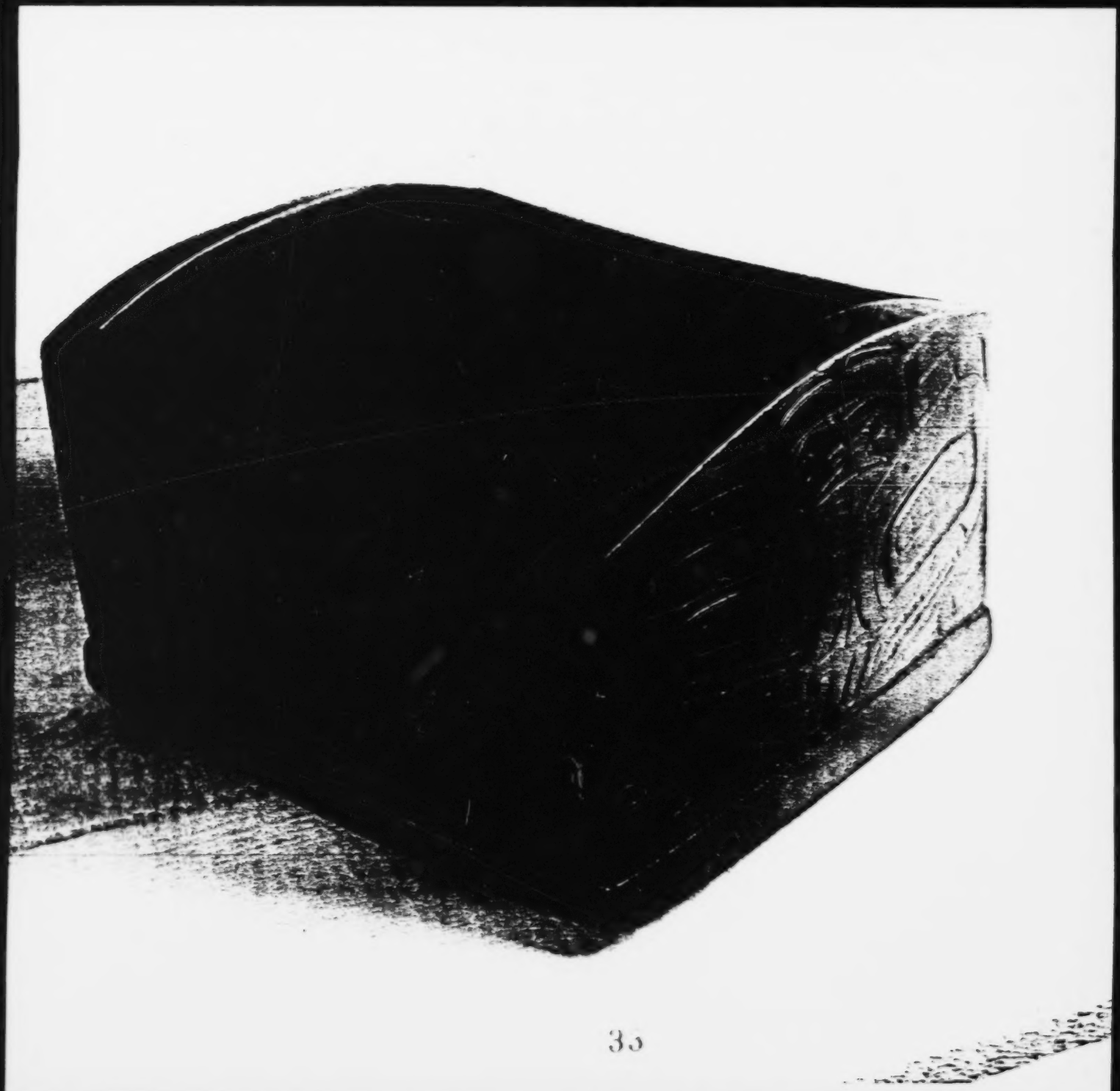
Although box shaped, this type of bentwood is considered a food bowl. The bowl shape always includes larger sides that bulge out in the center and curve up to the high narrow ends. The rim is undercut, forming a flange, and includes inlaid opercula. Food bowls did not have wooden lids like those on the boxes, but were often covered with plaited cedar bark woven to fit tightly.

Food bowls like this were traditionally used to serve food at important clan gatherings. The food would be served from the bowl with large spoons and carved dishes.

The painting on this bowl is an example of two unusual styles sometimes found along the northern coast. The colors normally used in painting the primary and secondary formlines have been switched. Red has been used here for the primary formline while black has been used to define the secondary shapes.

The other unusual feature is the asymmetrical or side view of the creature's head painted on the bowl ends. This profile seems to wrap around to the side of the bowl with the body, feet and a wing or fin shape. A similar design is repeated on the opposite sides.

Measurements:
Length–22½"
Width–16"
Height at ends–13"
Height at sides–11½"



Bentwood Bowl–Haida

II-B-831

This bentwood bowl is called K'aaganéi S'íx̌ (eating dish). It was used during ceremonial feasts to serve food to distinguished guests.

The bowl was crafted, carved and painted by a Haida artist. It was finished with traditional stains in dull black and reddish brown and has acquired a beautiful lustre from years of polish and careful handling.

The four sides of the bowl were kerfed, steamed and bent from one continuous board and bound at the corner with root lashing.

This bent bowl was collected in 1897 by Governor Riggs at Dyea, a Tlingit community near the Chilkoot Pass.

Measurements:
Length–43.5 cm (17½")
Width–38.8 cm (15¼")
Height at ends–28 cm (11")
Height at sides–23.5 cm (9¼")

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Mountain Sheep-horn Spoon

Tlingit—Leineit Shál, Haida—Xoats Sdlaagwaala, Tsimshian—Hapsgaawlq

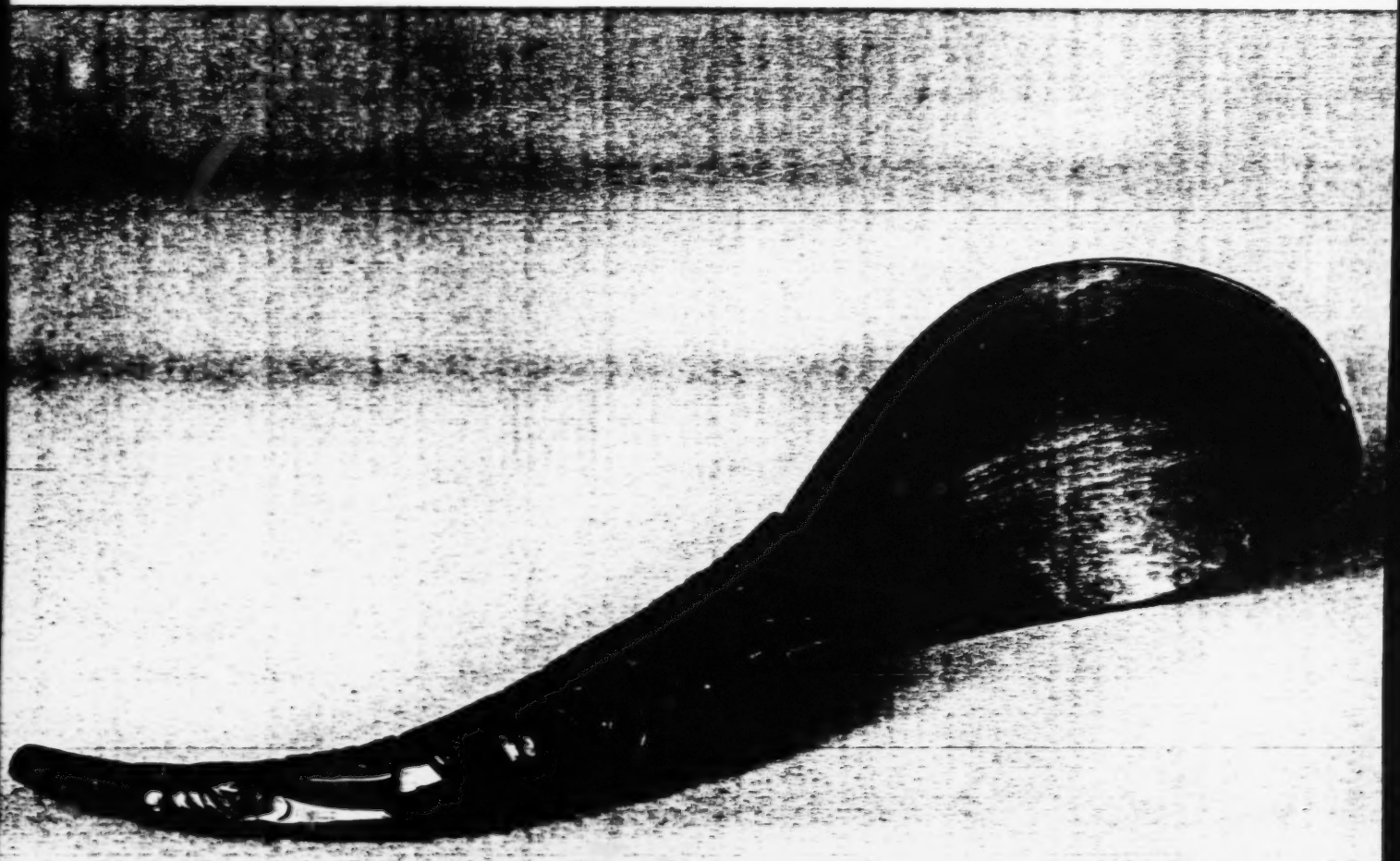
II-B-938

This spoon was steamed, shaped and carved from the horn of a Dall Sheep. Dall Sheep are not native to the Northwest coastal area. This horn was probably traded from other Indians of the interior, perhaps down the Chilkat or Stikine Rivers.

The carving on the handle of this spoon shows the Eagle. Eagle is carved with his beak open and tongue showing. Also shown are the Eagle's neck, backbone, ribs and ovid designs which represent shoulders. This carving was done after the horn was traded to the coast.

A large, decorated spoon like this would have been used during an important feast or celebration when important guests were visiting. A spoon this size would likely be used as a serving dish from which one would eat with a smaller spoon.

Measurements:
Length–28.5 cm (11¼")
Width–12.8 cm (4½")



Goat Horn Spoon

Haida—Sha-gul

II-B-969

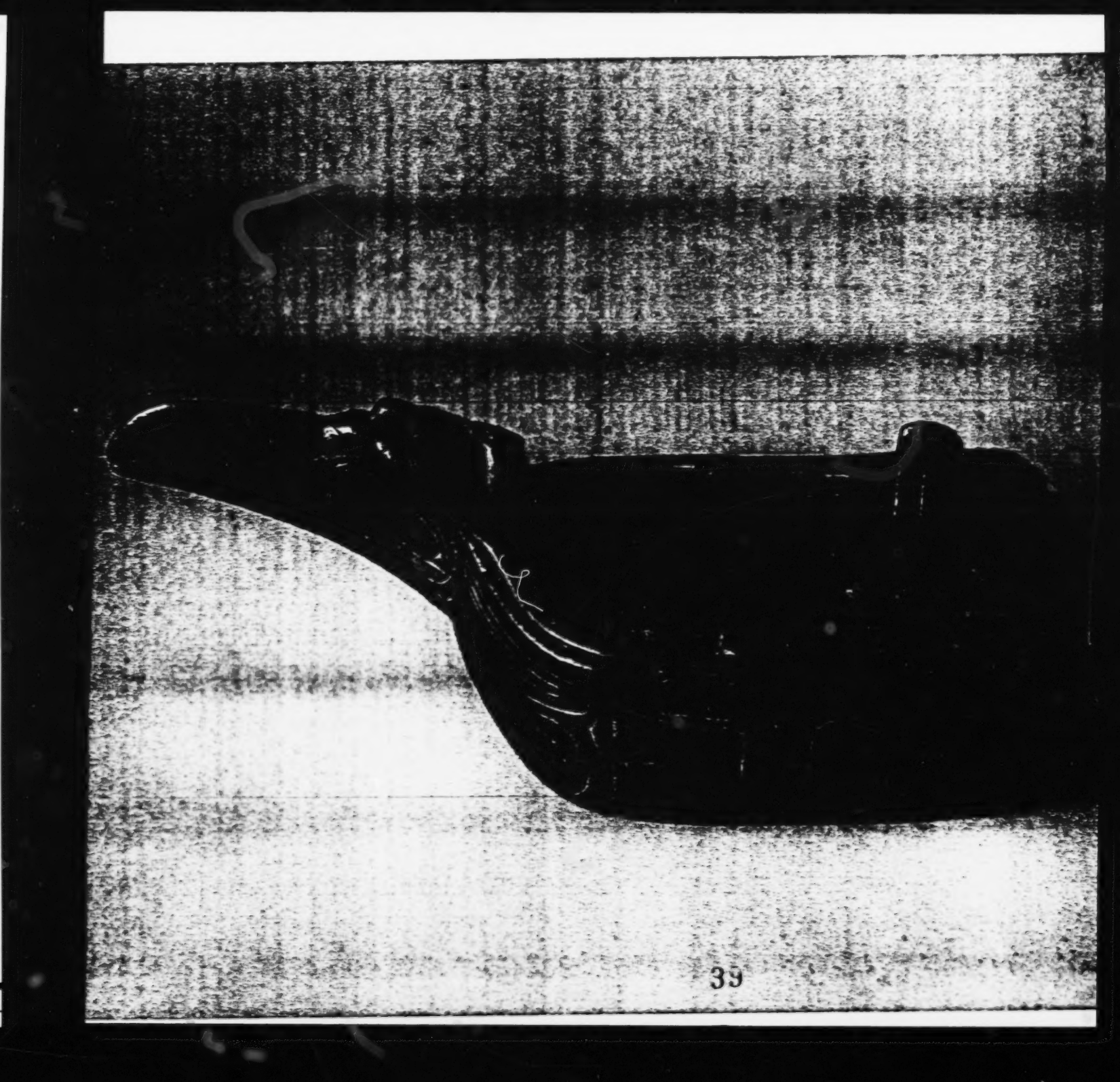
Goat horn spoons were steamed, shaped, and carved from the horns of a Mountain Goat. This type of spoon was used during special celebrations, events or gatherings when honored guests were present.

The carving on the handle of this spoon shows Raven wearing a tall, three-ringed "Potlatch" hat and a large bird with a wide bill holding a crouching man between his wings.

Goat horn spoons were made through a difficult process which required a master craftsman to steam the horns until soft and pliable and then press them between wooden shaping molds until dry. While still pliable the handle could be carved.

This spoon was collected near Wrangell during the Gold Rush of 1898. Although Wrangell is in traditional Tlingit territory, the style of carving is recognized as Haida. The goat horn spoon was probably traded between the Haida and Tlingit.

Measurements:
Length–25.5 cm
Width–6.9 cm



Grease Dish

Haida—Kai-hla

II-B-1845

This carved bowl or "grease dish," was used to serve oil for dipping when eating dried fish or meat. The oil rendered from seal fat, whale blubber and certain fish is an important part of the traditional Northwest Coast Native diet. The favorite oil for dipping comes from the Eulachon, a small yet very oily fish also known as Hooligan or Candle fish. Eulachon oil was also an important trade item with the Indians of the Interior. The trade routes into the interior were referred to as "Grease Trails" because so much of the trade was in Eulachon oil or grease.

The design and style of carving used in making this grease dish has been identified as Haida and probably comes from the Haida community of Masset where other carvings very similar to this are known to have been carved.

The overall shape of the bowl is carved in the form of Raven. Raven's head and beak double as a handle while his wings and tail feathers form the sides and end of the bowl. The tail section is also carved to represent the head of a bird with its beak pointing upward. This bird is said to be either the Hawk or Thunderbird.

The face and outstretched arms carved on the top of the bowl represent Hummingbird, Raven's companion during the creation of the world.

The design is very similar to the one used on dancing rattles which also take the form of Raven.

Measurements:
Length–8¼"
Width–4½"

Grease Dish

Tlingit—K'aaganéi

II-B-1746

The "Otter Man" bowl was used to serve oil with meals. The Otter Man is carved in a crouched position with his arms extending out for support. The eyes are made of inlaid abalone shell, the teeth of bone and the other inlays along the bowl's rim are of abalone shell, bone and seed beads.

The Otter Man story, as told in Sitka, is about a man who has drowned and lives with the otter people. He appears to his parents and helps them to catch many fish when they are in need but vanishes when they return to Sitka. The Otter people are spoken of in many stories and are usually considered fearful as they are said to take captives.

This bowl was collected in Sitka in 1904 by a man named Harrington. Dr. Erna Gunther thinks this carving could be the work of either of two famous Sitka carvers around that time; Walton or Bean.

Measurements:
Length–12"
Width–6¾"

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Kiks.ádi Frog Dance Hat

Tlingit—Kiks.ádi S'aaxw

II-B-1840

The Kiks.adi Frog Hat is carved of Sitka Spruce and includes ovid shape inlays of Abalone shell. The top rings are made of tightly woven spruce roots. A white pelt of ermine fur has been attached to the top of the joints.

Crest hats were intended for ceremonial use and often included realistic carvings of the clan crest. On this hat the artist has carved the secondary (red) and tertiary (blue) forms in flat relief. The primary formlines, however, have been carved in full form, natural frog shape. This combination of flat relief and full form (3-D) carving is also found in totem poles, house posts and some rattles.

The Kiks.ádi (Frog) are of the Sitka Raven Clan. Together with the Museum, the Kiks.ádi are co-owners of this hat. It is kept at the Museum except when displayed or worn on important occasions.

Measurements:
Width–12½"
Height–6¾"
Height of woven 6-ring cylinder–6¼"

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Spruce Root Ceremonial Hat

Tlingit—Shada Kóox'

II-B-830

This ceremonial hat is made of woven Spruce root and is painted in a style very much like the Chilkat dancing blankets. Its large size, (23½" diameter), four top rings, complex painted design, and the attached ermine skin indicate that this hat was made for an important member of the clan.

The four basketry rings attached to the top of the hat, often called "Potlatch Rings," each represent an important event associated with the hat or the clan who owned it.

The painted design is said to represent the legendary Gunakadeit, magical creature of the sea.

This basketry hat came to the Museum through Henry Moses, a fur buyer in Southeast Alaska around the turn of the century. He reported that the hat had once belonged to a Wrangell Chief who lost the hat, and his life, in the Sitka Massacre of 1852.

The hat later belonged to Chief Gosh-tate-a-er-art of Sitka and his wife Princess Tom of Yakutat. Princess Tom became famous throughout Southeast Alaska for both her nobility and her trading activities.

Measurements:
Diameter–23½"
Width of brim–12-1/8"

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Raven Rattle

Tsimshian—Sasoo

II-B-66

Rattles of this type, often referred to as Chief's Rattles, were traditionally used by the Tlingit, Haida and Tsimshian people as both a musical instrument and as a ceremonial object. A Raven Rattle would only be used at special clan gatherings, like a Potlatch, and then only by important, high ranking clan members. Traditional use of a Raven Rattle always indicated the presence of the supernatural.

The original meaning of the Raven rattle is not known but we do have an account of what each figure represents. This type of rattle is called a Raven Rattle as its basic shape is that of a raven in flight. Raven's head and beak are arched forward, the wings are carved open and pointing back towards the handle and the tail feathers are carved up and bent forward towards the raven's head. The tail feathers also form the shape of another bird's head, possibly Hawk, as the beak curves around and touches the mouth.

Carved on Raven's back is the figure of a man holding a frog. The frog is shown biting the man's outstretched tongue. This might represent an exchange of power between the frog and the man but the exact meaning is not known.

On Raven's chest another face or bird form is carved and painted in a formline design. Some accounts say that Thunderbird is shown but again, the exact meaning is a mystery.

The rattle is cut in half, hollowed and lashed together. Beads and pebbles are inserted to make the rattle sound. The rattle is carved of maple with inlays of abalone shell.

Measurements:
Length: 13¾"

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Copper
Tlingit—Tináa

The "Copper" or "Tináa" was an important symbol within the traditional Northwest Coast society. They often represented an enormous value in trade goods and became one of the important signs of a clan's social status or achievement. Native copper was originally a trade item, probably coming from the Copper River area. As a "Copper" was traded south, its value increased with each transaction. Some coppers were known to be bartered for as many as 14,000 trade blankets worth of goods, about $8,000, around the turn of the century.

The purchase, display and giving of a Copper always required a ceremony and was closely associated with both the "Potlatch" ceremony and the complex marital customs of the Haida, Tlingit, and Tsimshian people. The dowery of a chief's daughter was not complete without a Copper and the Potlatch required to give it to the new husband was an important part of the marriage ceremony.

We do know that coppers were highly valued along the coast but the reason they were made in this shape remains a mystery.

The basic shape of a Copper consists of a pointed rectangular base divided by a raised "T" design. Above this, a wider, triangular shape forms the top section. This top section usually includes a painted and engraved clan symbol design.

This copper is a more recent version made from a mill manufactured copper sheet. The top section includes a design painted in black representing the bear. The "T" design is embossed (pounded out) from the same copper sheet rather than added on like those made of native copper.

This Copper was found buried on a small island northwest of Sitka and was collected by the Museum in 1940.

Measurements:
Height–36¼"
Width–21¾"
Thickness–3/8"

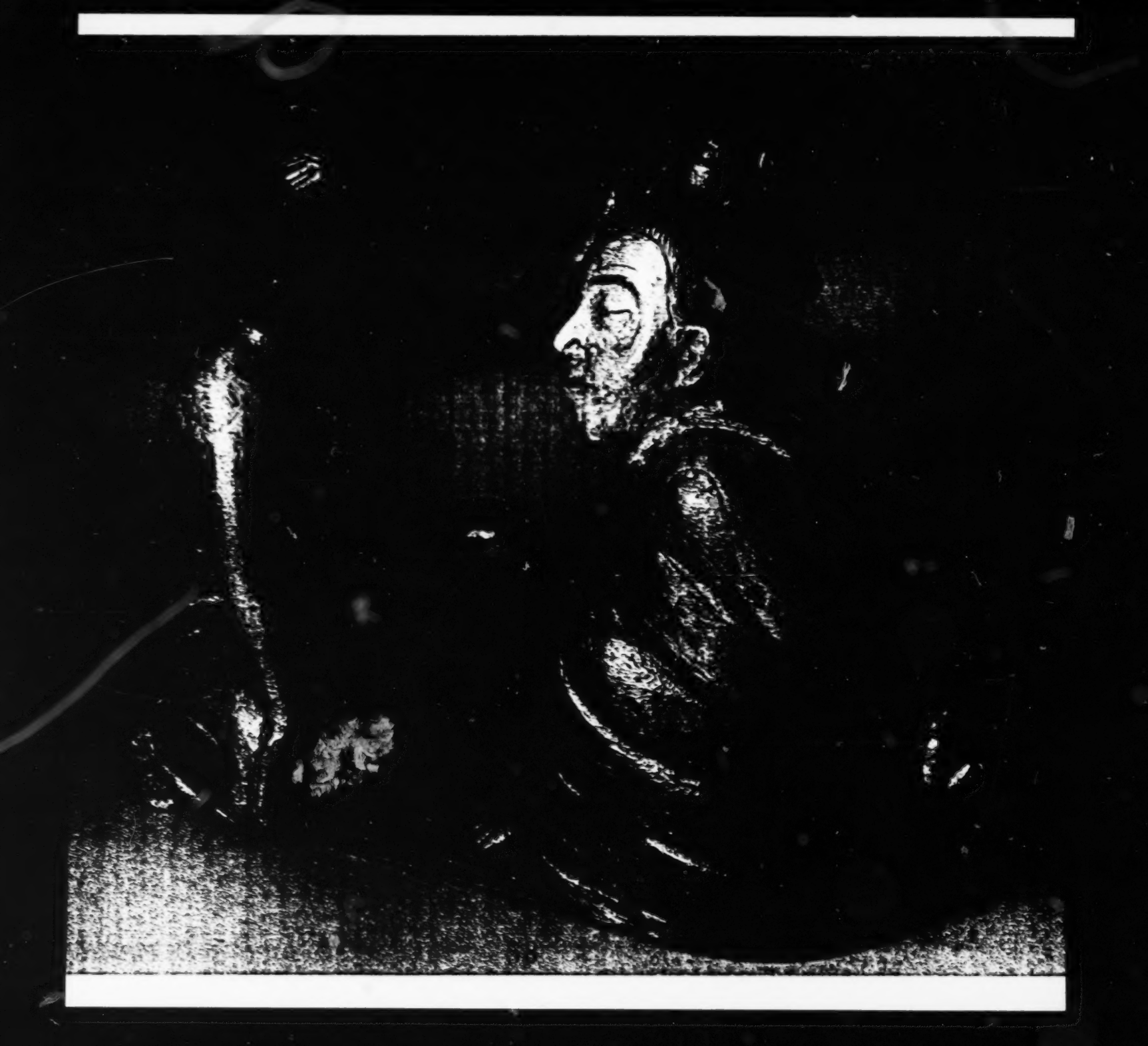
Shaman's Charm–Tlingit

II-B-804

This small charm is carved from a tooth, probably a Sea Lion's. Henry Moses, who collected this carving in Hoonah around 1910, reported this to be a Shaman's charm. The carving represents the Killer Whale with Raven in human form inside his stomach.

The story of Raven in the belly of the whale is part of the creation legend in which Raven affects the organization and creation of the world through his trickery and cunning. In this adventure Raven teaches the people how to render fat from whale blubber, creates the whale's blowhole and enjoys several feasts along the way. An account of this Raven adventure is included in the resource material in this kit.

Measurements:
Length–3½"



Shaman Torturing a Witch–Haida

II-B-801

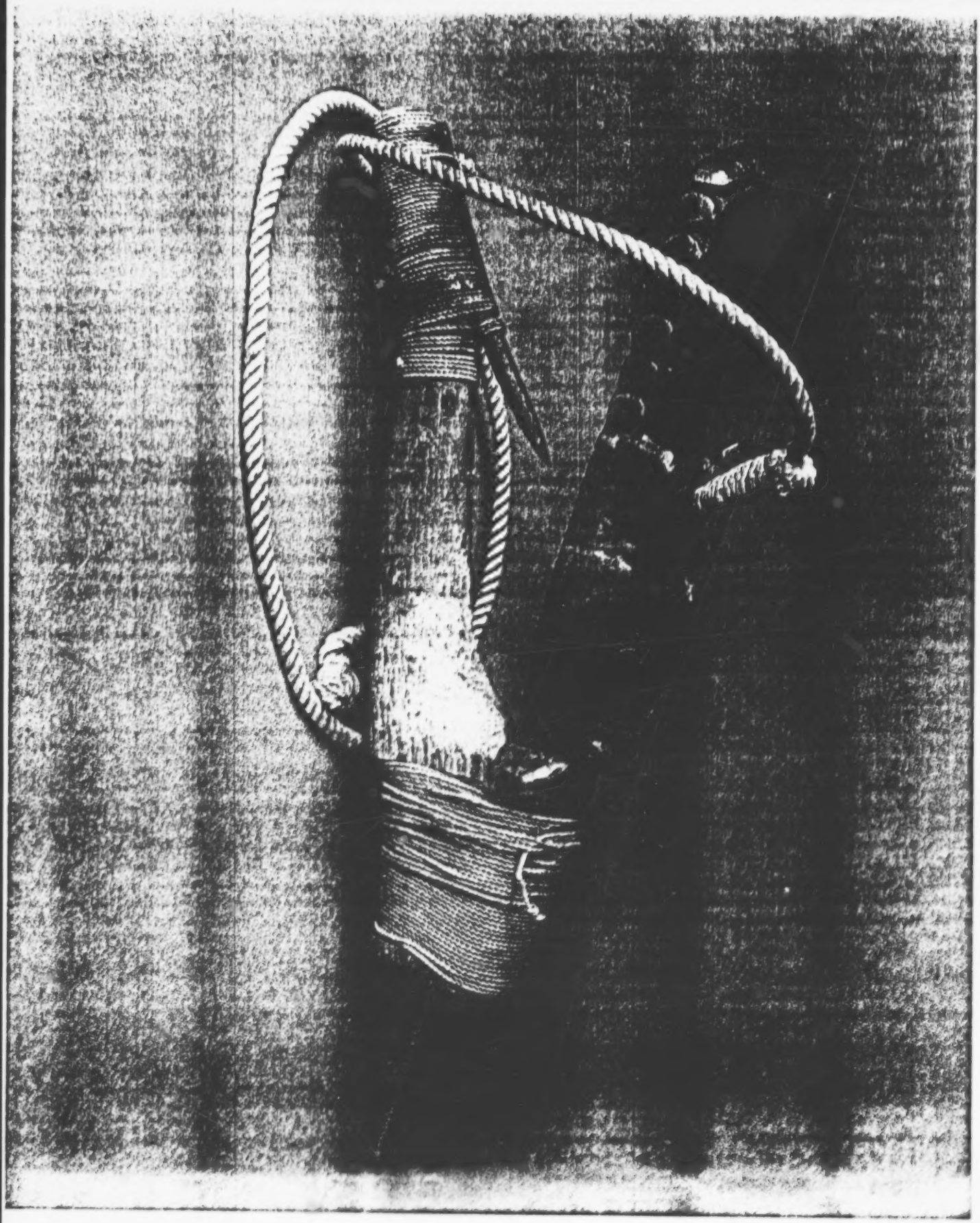
This is a rare example of Northwest Coast Indian sculpture that is free standing. Usually Northwest Coast artwork is applied or added to the surface of otherwise functional objects. Boxes, bowls, baskets, clothing, tools, houseposts, walls or boats are examples of objects which would often include surface decorations.

This carving shows a man, probably a shaman, torturing a witch by twisting her head with a stick wound through her hair. The witch has her hands tied behind her back.

The clan's shaman was responsible for interpreting, advising and directing the clan in all matters of the supernatural, and was also considered an important authority on medicine and treatment of the sick or injured.

This sculpture was collected north of Yakutat, but the style of carving has been identified as Haida.

Measurements:
Length–26.7 cm (10½")
Height–22.5 cm (8¾")
Width–10.5 cm (4¼")



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Halibut Hook

Tlingit—Naxw

II-B-788

The Devilfish, or octopus, has been carved onto the upper shaft of this halibut hook. The Devilfish is shown with a row of suckers, or tentacles carved along the edge of the upper half of the hook. His head includes a sharp beak or nose and a set of horns typical to Devilfish carvings.

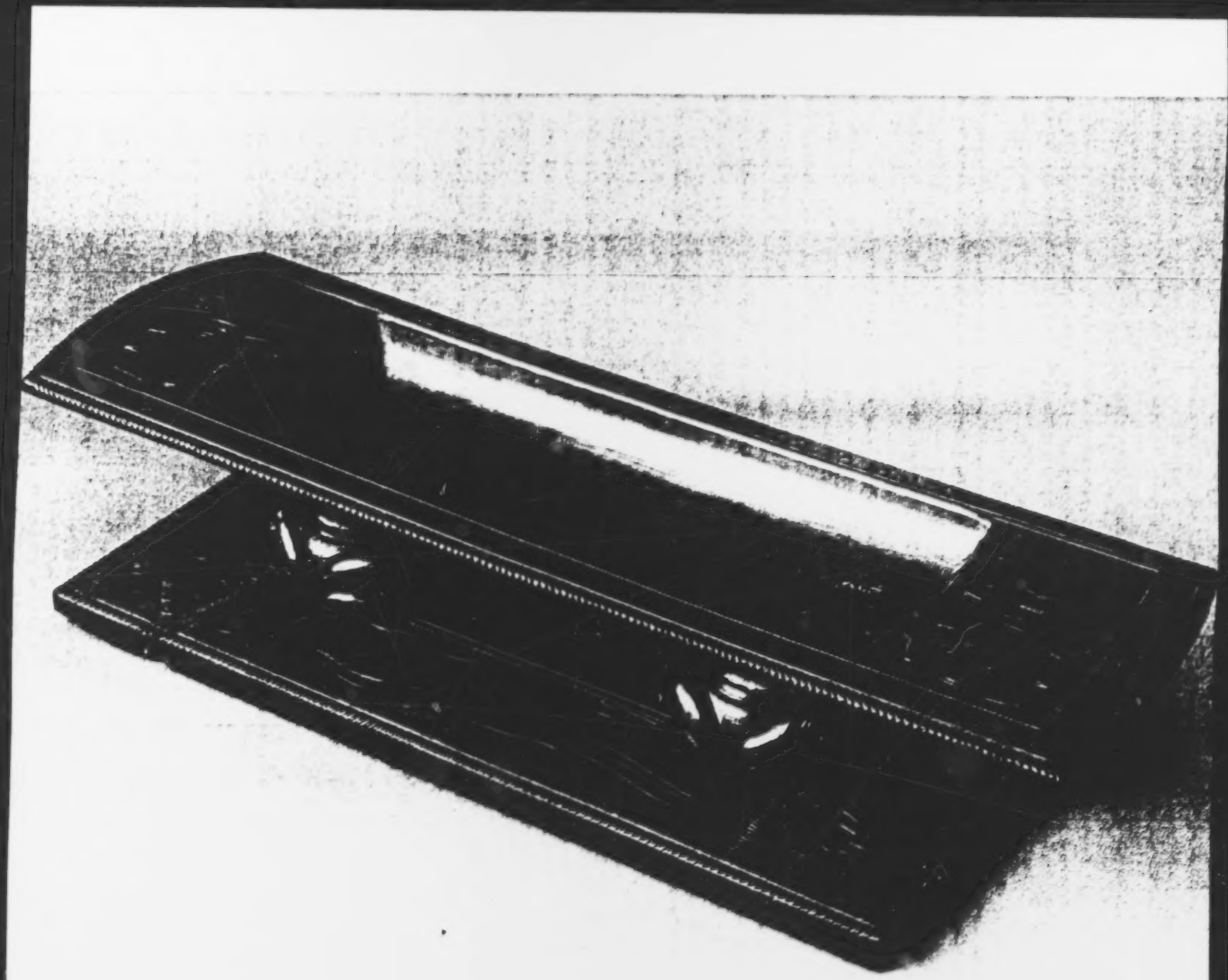
Halibut hooks usually included carvings like this which were intended to bring luck to the fisherman. Other symbols often found carved on these hooks include Wolf, Raven, Halibut, Seal and various birds.

These hooks floated near the bottom, attached to a line and float. The bait was attached to the hook at the metal spike. When a halibut took the bait, the top, or carved section would prevent it from opening its mouth to spit out the hook.

At the base of the spiked arm you can see the teeth marks made by the many halibut caught on this lucky hook.

This halibut hook was found among the belongings of Henry Kuchen and donated to the Museum in 1958.

Measurements:
Length-23.4 cm (9¼")
Width-4 cm (1-9/16")



Argillite Tray–Haida

II-B-826

Early in the 1820's argillite was discovered up Slatechuck Creek near the community of Skidgate on Queen Charlotte Island. Argillite is a hard form of clay similar to shale but without the flaky layering found in slate or shale. Native artists of the area were quick to recognize the sculptural qualities of argillite and beautiful examples of Haida style carving were soon available in the new-found material.

Argillite is very soft when first quarried or mined, but soon hardens when exposed to air. Some artists kept chunks of argillite buried in the ground until they were ready to use it. This kept it soft for carving.

Haida carvings were in demand as a trade item at that time and many argillite carvings were designed for the tourist trade. Pipes, flutes, candlestick holders, and model totem poles were popular and there are many examples of this type of carving. Likewise, argillite was quickly adopted to traditional art objects like the cermonial spoons, boxes, chests, bowls, dishes and trays.

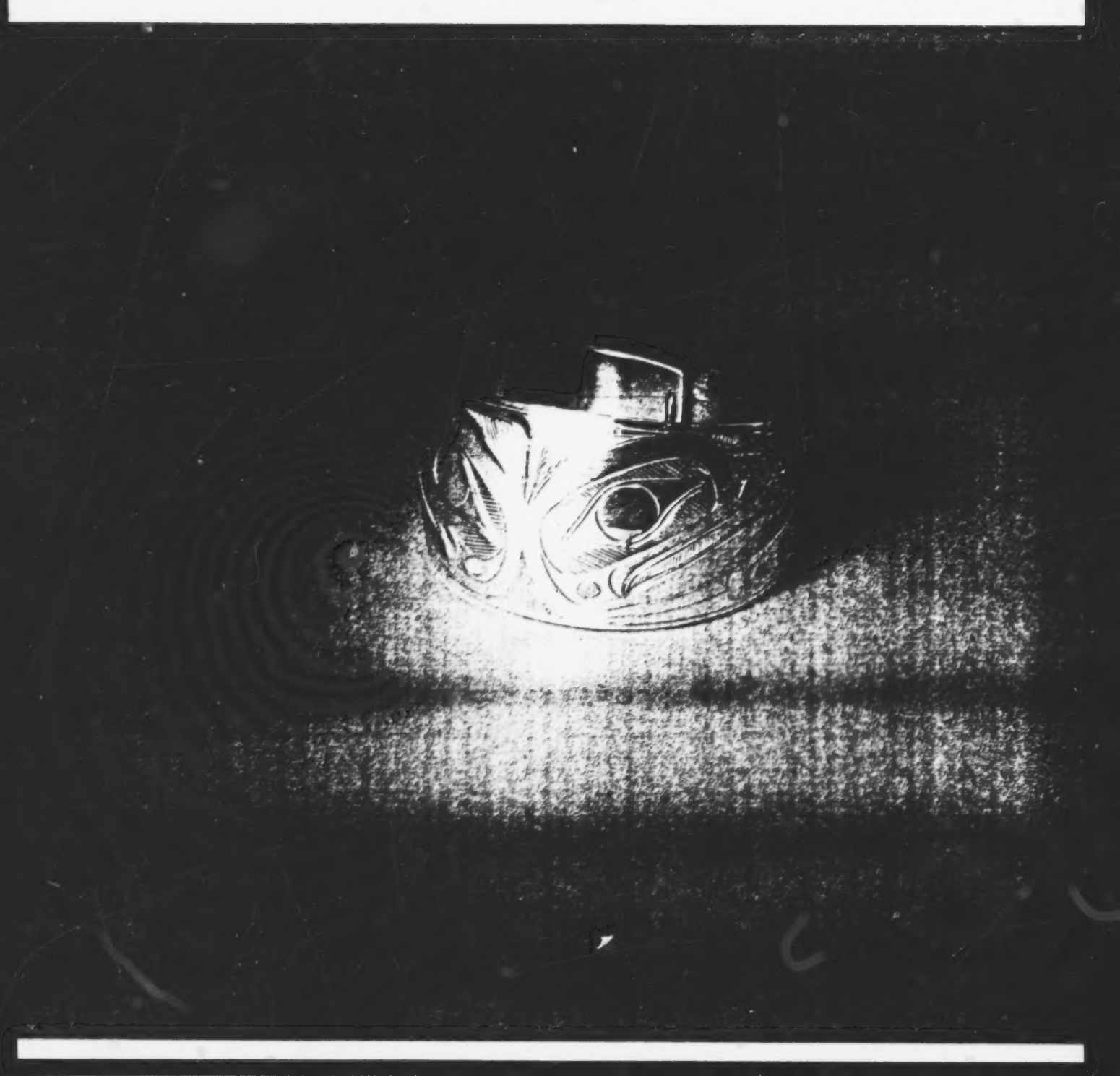
Most of the Haida carvers who worked in argillite are known and the master carvers can usually be identified by their work. We do not know for sure who carved this tray but we do know it came from the Queen Charlottes in the late 1800's. Some experts think that this tray is the work of the famous Haida carver, Charlie Edensaw, as it is typical of his carving style.

The tray is decorated at each end with a hawk design and held up by four corner pedestals carved in the shape of the frog. The base is flat and includes eight relief carvings of the killer whale. A cross-hatching technique has been used as a background filler around the killer whale designs.

Measurements:

Length–18"

Width–6"



Silver Raven Bracelet

Artist—Steve Brown

II-B-1863

Northwest Coast artists, long practiced in the skills of crafting iron and copper, were quick to adopt silver to their trade as it became available along the coast in the early 1800's. Silver coin became the most popular material for making jewelry and silver bracelets were soon seen along the entire coast. There were master craftsmen among the Haida, Tlingit and Tsimshian who became well known for their silverwork. One of the most famous of the early Haida silversmiths was Charlie Edensaw of Skidgate. It was one of Charlie's classic bracelets, carved around 1900, that Steve Brown used as a model for this split raven design. In this design Raven is split and joined at the back of the head with his wings and body parts arranged back towards the two tapered ends of the bracelet. The formlines are engraved in shallow line with single hatch lines used as a background filler.

Steve Brown, who carved this bracelet in 1983, is a well-known contemporary artist working in the Northwest Coast Native tradition. Steve studied Northwest Coast Art as an apprentice working with well-known master carvers.

Dimensions:
Width–1½"